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Love letter to Vermont: Michael Leonard's 'One Town at a Time'

By Janelle Faignant Arts Correspondent May 18, 2019



Jerry Greenfield, Ben & Jerry's co-founder, appears in "One Town at a Time"

The writer who wrote the famous line "You can never go home again" might never have said that if he'd lived in Vermont.

An estimated 13 million people visit the state each year, and just over half a million are lucky enough to call it home. Woodstock native Michael Leonard left Vermont only to realize how special it was and return. And it inspired him to make a movie — a love letter to Vermont about what makes it and the people who call it home special.

There are 251 towns and cities in Vermont, and a club dedicated to exploring them, is called, appropriately, the 251 Club. The fee to join is nominal. When Leonard was 20, he joined with two friends and took off on a road trip in 2006 with an old handheld camera.

Ten years later Leonard had been living outside Vermont for over a decade. He moved back home and decided to revisit the 251 Club, returning to some of the same places and even the same people he had met 12 years earlier.

“I wanted to do something with that footage,” he said by phone recently, “and started on this challenge of how to finish telling this story I started in 2006.”

The footage became “One Town at a Time,” a documentary that will premiere at the Woodstock Town Hall at 6:30 p.m. Friday, May 24, before traveling throughout the state in a summer screening tour.

The film flashes between 2006 and today, and includes diverse voices from across Vermont, such as former Gov. Jim Douglas and Ben & Jerry’s co-founder Jerry Greenfield, in addition to townspeople and 251 Club members.

Leonard never planned to be a filmmaker, but said, “I think the story’s really interesting and the best medium for that ended up being film.”

“I honestly don’t know why we took an old camcorder around with us,” he recalled. “We would come into a town and find total strangers and interview them about their town. We also recorded a lot of our own experiences in the car driving around, being three 20-year-olds with the windows down and the music blasting, having a good time.”

Leonard ended up with more than just a record of his experience. It was a slice of life that “felt very authentic.”

“This whole idea came about because after growing up in a small town in Vermont, I wanted a completely different experience and went to school in New York,” he said. It didn’t take long to realize what he had left behind.

“I felt this sense of community that I learned that wasn’t unique to the town I grew up in. That model of community exists all across the state, and it’s not something you get everywhere,” Leonard said.

Connected to that was a desire to tell the story of the 251 Club, which has been around for 65 years, and has over 6,000 members. And the choice to live in Vermont is “usually not based on economic gain or having some big fancy career or lifestyle.”

“It’s very light hearted,” Leonard said. “It’s also adventurous, with a sense of filling out the map and ticking off the boxes and exploring these places. What makes the story more interesting is having this shift in perspective, seeing the state at two different time periods where there have been changes but also consistencies.”

Sometimes you can go home again. And it looks even better.